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## Building the B&M

Iowa's first settlers had helped build and repair the rough country roads which served as highways. With the coming of the railroads, the farmers along the line turned out to help prepare the ground for the iron rails. Eighteen farmers between Burlington and Ottumwa received contracts from the B&M in May of 1854 to grade the seventy-five miles between those two cities. At the same time, Alfred Hebard, who had made the preliminary survey to the Missouri River, received the contract for bridging the road from Burlington to Ottumwa, while Charles H. Snelson and Sandon Mullen agreed to furnish the ties.

This was, in any day, an expensive project; in 1854, for a railroad company with practically an empty till, it seemed almost foolhardy. Yet, after many setbacks and the intervention of depression and civil war, the B&M, still under its original name, reached Council Bluffs by January 1, 1870 — eighteen years from the time the forty-six met in Burlington. It was, to quote Dr. Richard C. Overton, historian of the Burlington Railroad, "only by this magic combination of western determination and eastern dollars that the early Burlington was built."



Once started, the dirt began to fly, and hopes were high. But money trickled in slowly from subscriptions for shares, and county bonds were not released to the company until the track reached the county granting the bonds. An attempt was made in June to sell \$1,200,000 in shares in the East, but the effort failed. J. M. Forbes came to the rescue with \$25,000 and the promise of as much more. However, in spite of these heroic efforts, work on the road was almost suspended by the end of summer. Through the winter months many became discouraged.

With the spring of 1855 hopes again rose. On March 17 the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad reached East Burlington, and the usual celebration was in order. On May 31 Burlington turned out to welcome Lewis Cass, Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, the mayor of Chicago, and "other luminaries" who had come to the little Iowa city to rejoice in another link completed in the growing chain of American railroads. They were welcomed by Governor Grimes, who did the honors of the occasion until time for the supper. This festivity he refused to attend, because he felt that as Governor he should not take part in a "supper where it was known that champagne was to be drunk." That, and a strong distaste for after-dinner speaking and speeches, were, he felt, sufficient reasons for staying at home.

By this time Jonathan C. Hall, one of the orig-



inal forty-six incorporators, was president of the B&M. Encouraged by the arrival of the CB&Q just across the river from his partly-graded line of road, Hall asked for bids on completing the line from Burlington to the Skunk River in Henry County. After much dickering, Clarke and Hendrie of Burlington received a contract to build to the Skunk River at a price of \$22,500 per mile for the thirty-five miles — a total of \$787,500. They set to work at once; grading out of Burlington was completed, the iron arrived, and tracks were laid. On January 1, 1856, four years after the incorporation of the B&M, a brass-trimmed, wood-burning engine, with the characteristic funnel stack of the nineteenth century locomotives, "chuffed out of Burlington a few miles and returned." At last the work of four years was beginning to bear fruit, and Burlingtonians would soon "take an affectionate farewell of that time-honored institution, the stage coach."

The year 1856 was a memorable one for Iowa railroads. In May, after some ten years of petitions, memorials, and political pressure, Congress at last passed an act granting lands to four east-west lines in Iowa. Governor Grimes immediately called the General Assembly into special session, and on July 14 the Iowa legislature enacted the necessary legislation accepting the grant, which totaled about three and one-half million acres of Iowa land. According to the act of Congress, the



railroads were to receive the alternate odd-numbered sections "for six sections in width on each side of each of said roads," provided that these sections were unoccupied at the time. If some of the lands were already sold, then indemnity lands for fifteen miles back from the road could be substituted. The Iowa legislature added further stipulations: first, the entire road must be located and a map filed with the Governor before April 1, 1857; second, to qualify for the lands, each road must have "completed and equipped" seventy-five miles within three years, thirty miles each year thereafter for five years, and the entire line must be completed by December 1, 1865. The lands were to be turned over to the railroads in 120-section lots upon the completion of each twenty miles of road. The Burlington and Missouri's share of this first grant amounted to about 300,000 acres; on September 3, 1856, the directors voted to accept the grant and its conditions.

Just five days before Congress had passed the land grant act — on May 10, 1856 — the B&M had mortgaged the first thirty-five miles of their road for \$350,000. Thus, with money in hand, and the promise of more to come from sales of the land grant, the prospect was bright by the end of 1856. Progress had been made since New Year's Day when the first locomotive had made its appearance. By the end of April the first passenger train began running on the partially completed



line; in May the track was finished to Danville, Des Moines County; on June 17 the rails reached New London in Henry County; and in the following month they were completed to Mount Pleasant.

News of the land grant increased activity all along the projected line. Henry Thielsen was instructed to start the final survey west of Ottumwa, and in the sparsely settled counties of southwestern Iowa enthusiasm ran high. Thielsen's arrival at Glenwood in Mills County on the Missouri River was followed shortly by a "Railroad Meeting" which resolved to open subscription books for the B&M at once. Glenwood was "all life and motion."

It had taken two years to build the thirty miles from Burlington to Mount Pleasant. It took another year to complete the five miles to the Skunk River at Rome. Not until September 1, 1857, did the B&M freight trains begin service to that small Henry County community. A second mortgage of \$275,000 had been negotiated in January, 1857, but even that effort, plus the work of John Murray Forbes in raising \$1,500,000 during the year did not help to speed the rails westward. The severe financial depression of 1857 had slowed progress almost to a standstill. In May of 1857 Edward L. Baker of New Bedford, Massachusetts, had been elected president of the B&M, signaling the growing eastern control of what had started out to be merely a local Iowa road.



Meanwhile, John Murray Forbes in Boston watched the struggles of the B&M carefully; he now had a large stake in the Iowa road and he wanted his own man on the spot to watch things. Characteristically, for Forbes believed in young men, his choice fell on twenty-three-year-old Charles Russell Lowell, a nephew of the poet James Russell Lowell. In August, 1858, young Lowell arrived in Burlington, a town, so he wrote his mother, with "a half-fledged look, the pinfeathers being very apparent," but still a town "not to be sneezed at." With the title of assistant treasurer, Lowell set to work to learn the business of railroading. Iowans, oppressed by falling prices and lagging railroad construction, were growing restive and beginning to grumble, while newspapers alternately scolded and lectured. One suggestion of a Burlington paper, that "*people* along their line will be of vastly greater value to them than land," may well have been listened to thoughtfully by Lowell and the B&M interests. When, in 1870, they began the huge task of converting their land grant into cash, they sold, as far as possible, to actual settlers who would develop the country and produce surpluses to be shipped via railroad to the markets of the world.

John G. Read, vice-president of the B&M and superintendent in charge of construction, was also in Burlington by 1858. Under his patient direction the line slowly pushed the sixteen miles to Fairfield

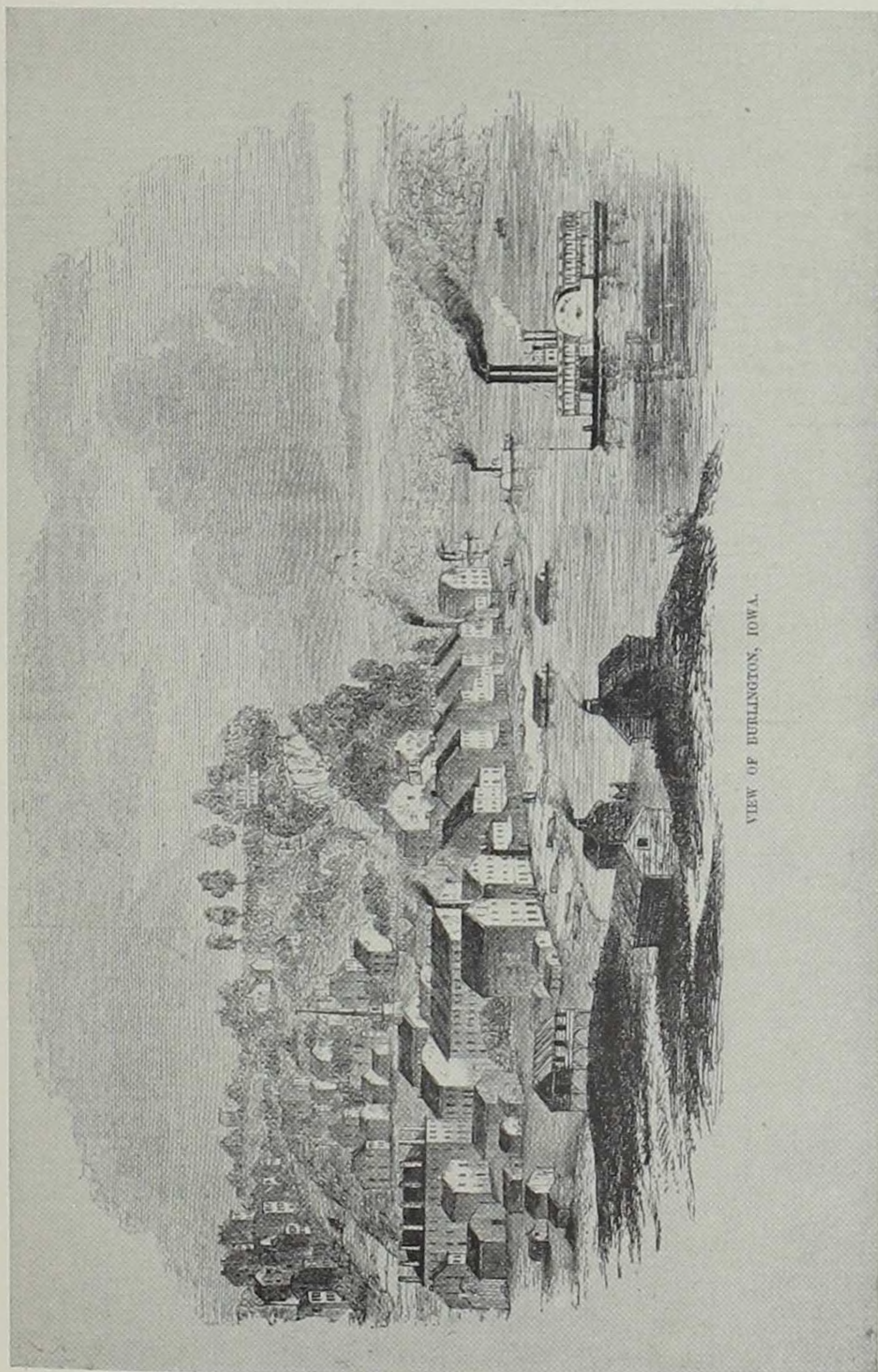


by August 1, but this was all the B&M could show in the way of progress that year. The city of Burlington, following a visit from James F. Joy, had added its municipal help during the year, granting the road \$75,000 of its bonds, plus the river accretions along the Mississippi for depot grounds. In October a third mortgage of \$1,000,000 brought the bonded indebtedness of the small road to over a million and a half. This money, plus the stock which had been sold in Iowa and in the East, enabled the road to reach the Des Moines River at Ottumwa by late August, 1859, in time to meet the requirements of the land grant act.

A "Grand Railroad Celebration" was planned at Ottumwa for September 1. The citizens resolved that all previous celebrations must be surpassed. The committee sent out a call for donations of money, produce, "cakes, pies, fowls, butter, honey, &c." Expressing the general excitement over the approach of rail connections with the east, they closed their plea with a resounding call:

Farmers of Wapello! you who have been in the habit of selling your produce for a mere song, and taking store pay — you who have waded through snow and storms with your stock to the Mississippi — you who have travelled after mud wagons to get your yearly supplies — you, all of you! come forward and let us rejoice together over the arrival of the "Iron Horse!" Let us glory over this most important event — have a good dinner and a unanimous and harmonious action, and go home satisfied with

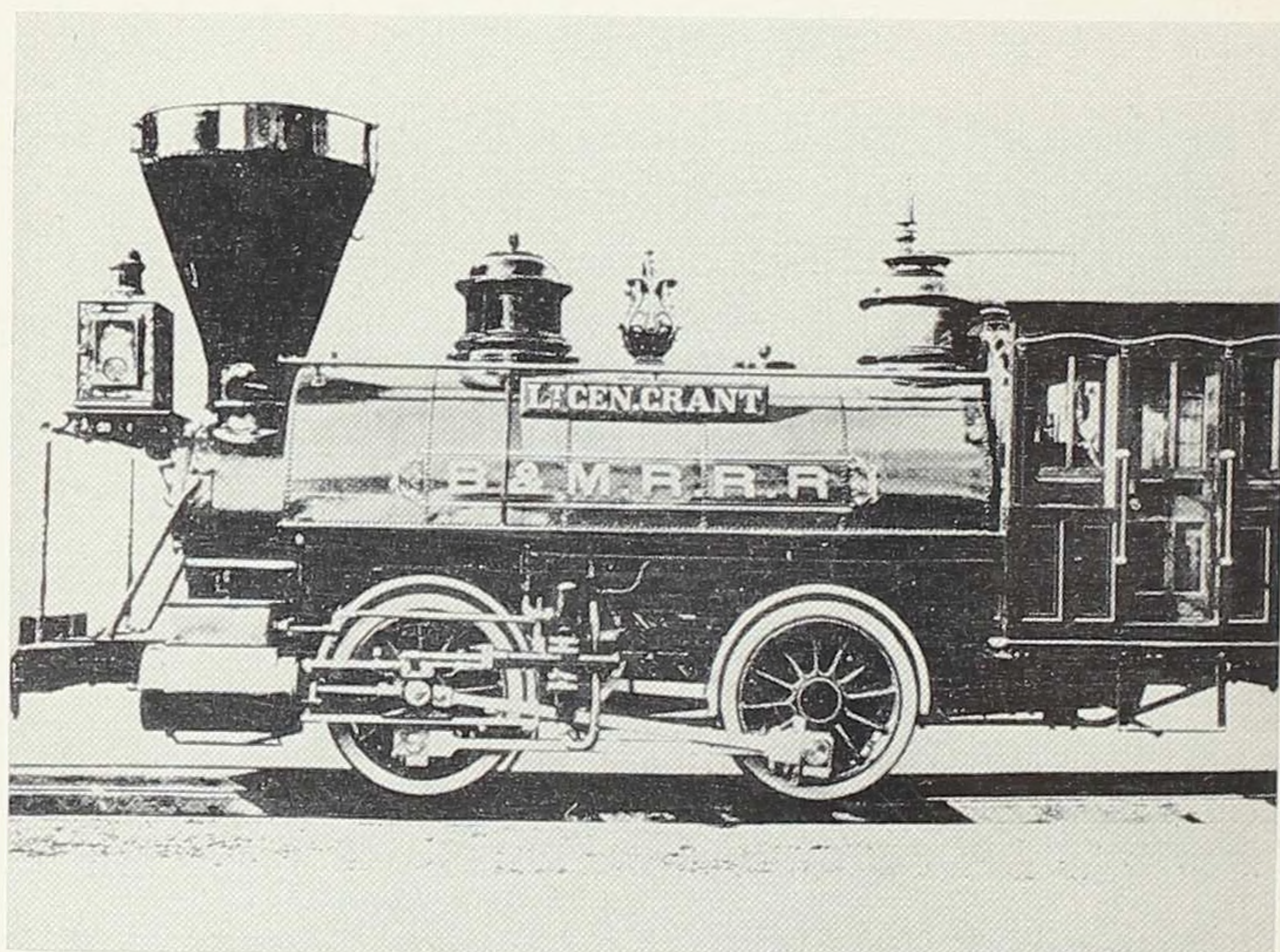




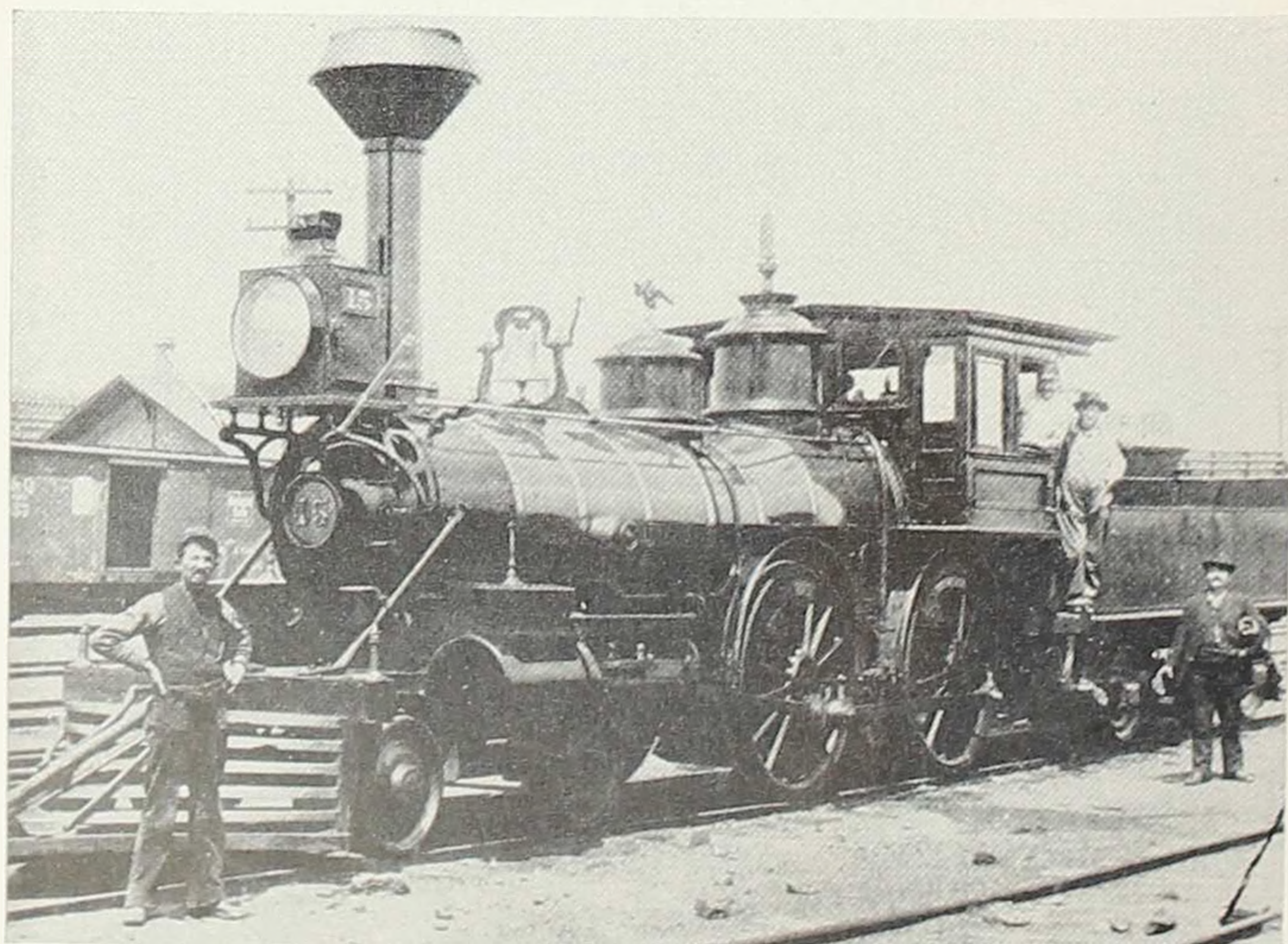
VIEW OF BURLINGTON, IOWA.

View of Burlington in 1850





*Credit Burlington Lines*  
B&M Locomotive built in 1866



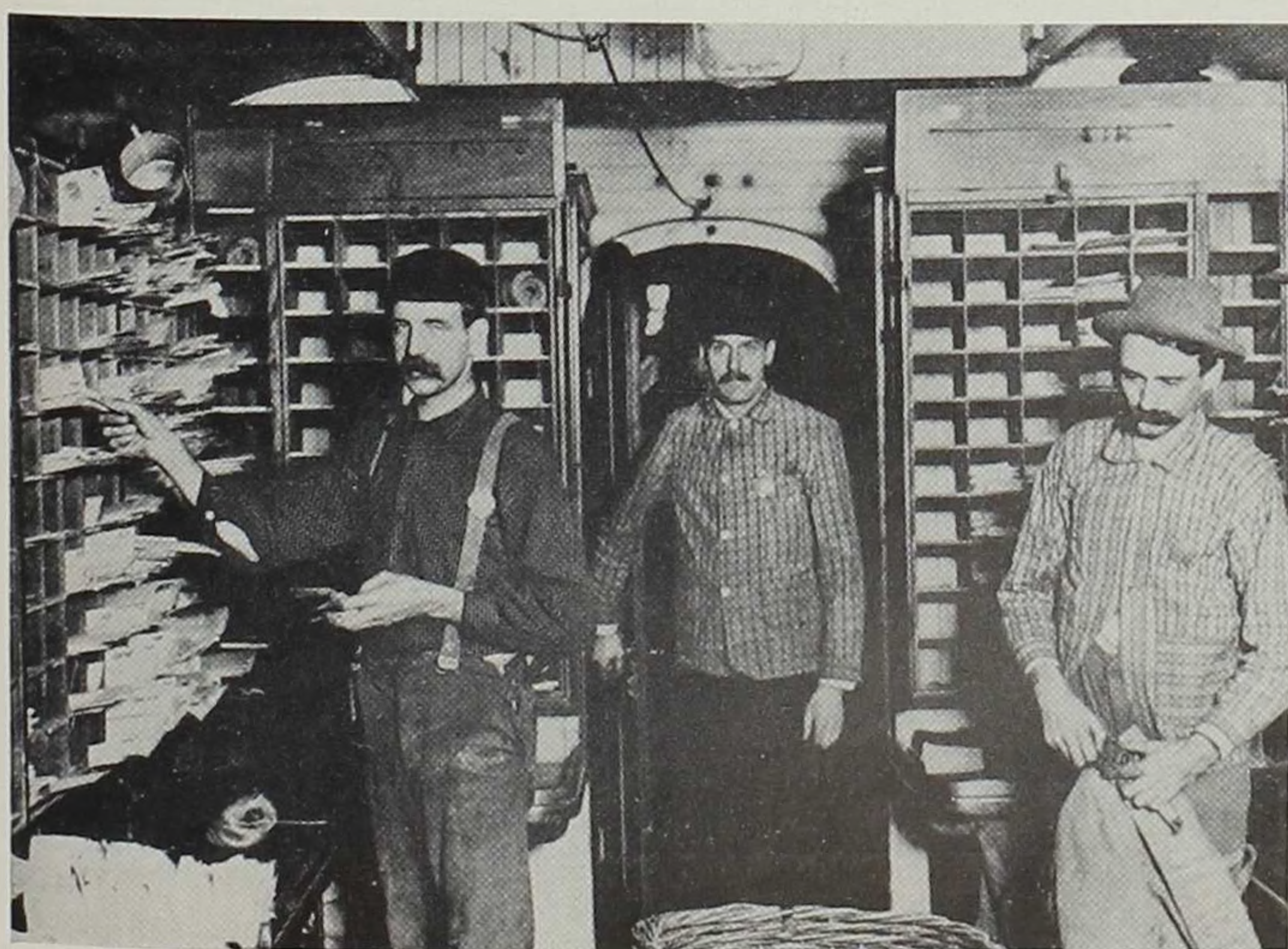
*Credit Burlington Lines*  
B&M Locomotive No. 15





*Credit Burlington Lines*

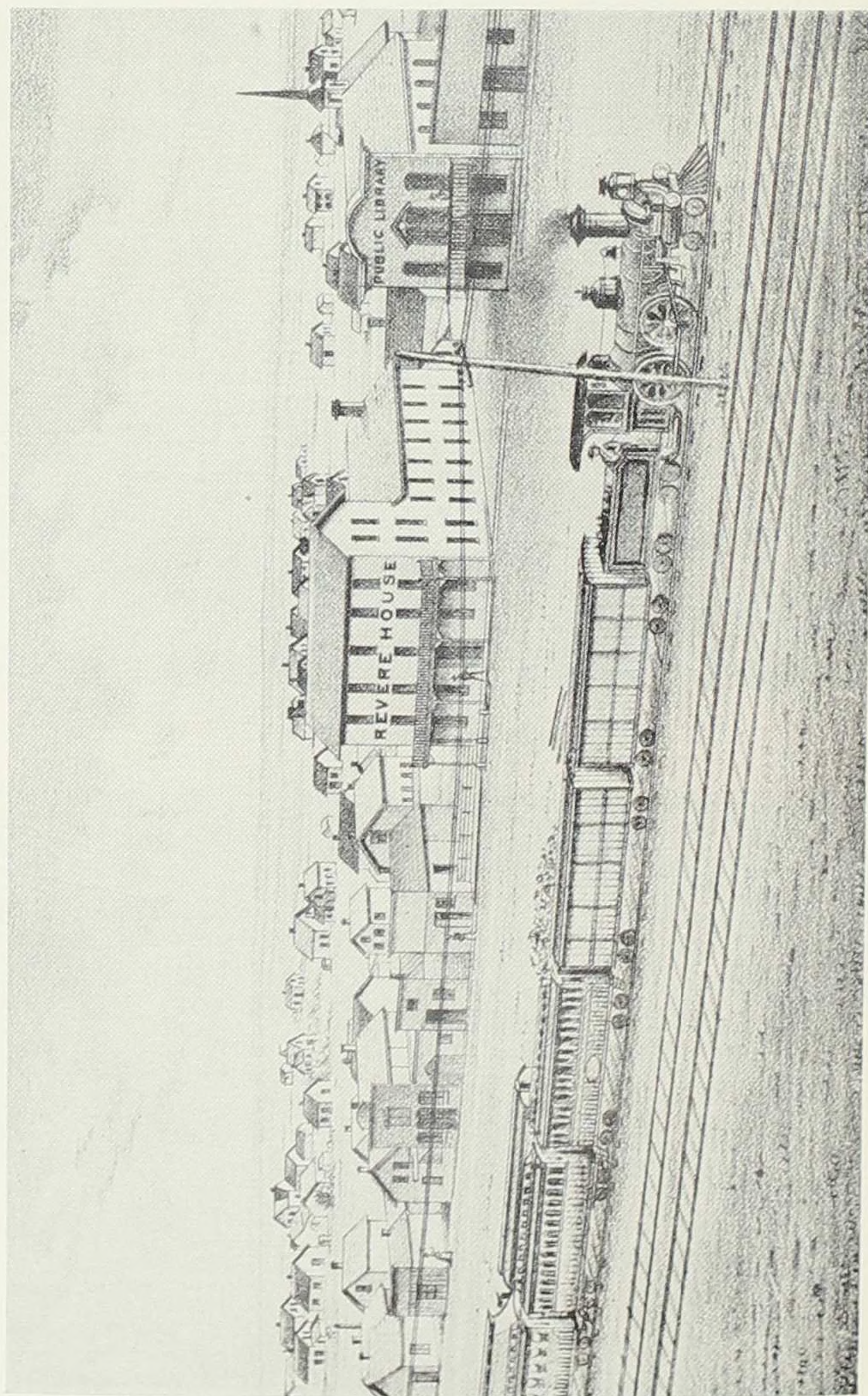
Traveling on the B&M



*Credit Burlington Lines*

Sorting Mail on the B&M





View of Creston in the 1870's



ourselves, and proud of our county! Now, altogether — let no one stand back.

At "7½ o'clock" on the morning of September 1, a half-mile-long excursion train left Burlington, "drawn by two magnificent first class locomotives" — the "J. C. Hall" and the "Mount Pleasant." A second section, also with two locomotives — the "Burlington" and the "Autograph" — followed, picking up passengers at every stop. A private coach brought many eastern stockholders and the officers of the road from Burlington, and when the supply of passenger coaches was filled to capacity, flatcars "trimmed with trees and branches" furnished benches for the militia companies, bands, fire companies, and "an immense number of citizens and their ladies." In all, some thirty-five assorted cars brought about 3,000 people to Ottumwa for the great day; many more came by wagon from the surrounding countryside. Ottumwa claimed 12,000 visitors that day.

Eight tables, each 460 feet long (in order to outdo Fairfield's 986-foot table at her celebration), were laden with food for the rank and file, while the officials were served a banquet prepared by Peter Ballingall in the new B&M freight house. The centerpiece at the table (which was covered with muslin costing seven cents a yard) was a two-foot-high pyramid of cake, topped by a Goddess of Liberty. Two balls closed the festivities, which continued "until broad daylight."



Ottumwa soon began to show the effects of the B&M on its economy. New businesses sprang up, and the Western Stage Company — retreating before the oncoming rails — set up its offices there. One corner of the stage company's office was set aside as a railroad ticket office, with J. W. Edgerly in charge. Two trains daily reached Ottumwa from Burlington, one an "express," the other an "accommodation." The latter made the trip in six hours; the "express," living up to its name, in five. Three lines of four-horse coaches carried passengers and goods westward from the railhead at Ottumwa.

Back in Burlington another young man had arrived to help Lowell in his expanding activities. He was but nineteen years old and his name was Charles Elliott Perkins. Twenty-two years later, in 1881, this youngster would become president of the CB&Q. But in 1859, at a salary of \$30 a month, he set about learning the railroad business. Within a year he was made assistant treasurer and land agent — with the job of organizing the exploration, surveying, classifying, and selling of between 200,000 and 300,000 acres of land in southern Iowa. Ralph Waldo Emerson visited Burlington in 1867 and remembered Perkins as "a noble youth who inspired interest and respect at once."

With seventy-five miles of the road completed, business on the B&M boomed, as the "cars" drained off the produce of the rich Des Moines



Valley. The balance sheet of April 30, 1860, showed that the road had spent \$2,750,000 to reach Ottumwa; even without counting equipment and surveys, the cost had been \$34,000 per mile. About 40 per cent of this sum had been realized from stock subscriptions; the balance was in bonds, bearing 8 per cent interest. As business increased in 1860, the B&M looked forward to expanding westward. But civil war intervened, and for seven years — from 1859 to 1866 — “end of track” for the B&M remained at Ottumwa.

The equipment of the B&M during the war years consisted of 8 wood-burning locomotives and 230 freight cars. What passenger cars they had were borrowed, probably from the CB&Q, until 1864 when two of their own were purchased. In that same year the road also began converting her wood-burning locomotives to coal. The average train consisted of only eight freight and two passenger cars; while the average freight load, per train, was only about 42 tons. Freight tonnage increased 50 per cent from 1860 to 1865, while passenger traffic doubled. But, in spite of seeming prosperity, the war years were hard ones for railroads. In order to meet interest payments due on bonds, President Baker proposed a refinancing program in 1863 which saved the road. The competition of the Des Moines Valley Railroad, which crossed the B&M at Ottumwa in 1863 and began taking some of the freight business from the Des



Moines Valley, made it more than ever necessary that the B&M resume its westward march.

The Iowa legislature had come to the rescue of her railroads, mired by the war, and had extended the time limit on building, so that the land grants would not be forfeited. Congress, in turn, lent a hand to the B&M in 1864, when an act was passed granting indemnity lands as far back from the line as twenty miles, in order to make up for much of the land in the original grant which had been taken up by previous settlement, swamp land claimants, or speculators. When the original grant of 1856 had been made, all land offices within the land grant area were ordered closed; but for some reason — the B&M suspected fraud — the Council Bluffs district office did not receive closing orders until several days after the other offices had been shut down. Knowledge of the land grant act was general; the land office at Council Bluffs was swamped with speculators who bought up great blocks of lands which were within the B&M grant area. Thus, although the B&M claimed some 300,000 acres by the 1856 act, only 230,000 were finally certified. It was to alleviate this condition that Congress passed, and President Lincoln signed, an act allowing about 100,000 additional acres to the B&M in Iowa.

A further grant of land from Congress in 1864 broadened the horizon of the B&M. Under the instigation of Representative James F. Wilson of



Fairfield, Congress granted the B&M about 2,368,000 acres in Nebraska, on condition that the road build its line through that territory to a junction with the Union Pacific Railroad at the 100th meridian. The B&M was now no longer merely an Iowa road but was raising its sights toward the proposed transcontinental railroad.

As the war drew to a close James F. Joy decided to make a personal reconnaissance of the area west of Ottumwa. He made two trips during the spring and summer of 1865, trips which promised well for a western Iowa railroad. At this time he was president of the CB&Q and a director of the B&M. Accompanied by Perkins and Thielsen, Joy left Burlington on May 18 by train to Ottumwa. A stagecoach took them on west, and they reached Albia at seven in the evening. Their presence "made a sensation," Perkins reported, and plans were made for a public meeting on the following Saturday.

The next day they continued on to Chariton in Lucas County by wagon, but because of a broken axletree finished the last mile into town on foot. The visit from the president of the Burlington, even if he had to walk to get there, was also a matter of excitement in Chariton. After dinner Joy met with the citizens at the courthouse and told them bluntly that if they wanted a railroad they would have to raise \$50,000. Chariton replied that she thought she could do it. Albia's reception and



reaction to a similar demand, made on the return journey, was not quite so enthusiastic as that of Chariton, but both Perkins and Joy were nevertheless encouraged.

They made a second trip in June and returned with promises from Albia and Chariton of \$100,000. In Chariton, Joy had to compete for attention with Yankee Robinson's circus parade, and at Albia they were served — but refused to eat — a supper of oysters. To easterners, oysters 1,300 miles from the seaboard — and in June, at that — were not only uneatable but unthinkable. The Albians, Perkins reported, ate them "as if they would never get another chance," a contingency he thought quite probable.

In September, 1865, Perkins was made superintendent of the B&M in Iowa, and John S. Wolf and S. C. Carpenter received a contract to build the B&M from Ottumwa to Albia. Construction began in July. At last the B&M was again moving westward. In May of 1866 Joy was elected president of the B&M, thus further strengthening the close ties with the Illinois road. A third trip, this time to the Missouri, came in August, when Peter Ballingall of Ottumwa drove Perkins and Joy across Iowa in a buggy. As a result of this trip Joy recommended another 50 miles of road, through Chariton and Osceola to Afton in Union County.

Up to this time goods had been ferried from the



B&M at Burlington to the CB&Q at East Burlington, an expensive and time consuming process. During the winter months, of course, Nature provided a quicker method, when the mighty Mississippi froze over and goods and passengers could be transferred on the ice. But a bridge was needed. The Rock Island had completed its bridge at Davenport in 1856; a bridge at Burlington was long overdue. Thus, when the directors of the CB&Q, on September 11, 1866, voted to bridge the Mississippi at Burlington, the B&M people took heart. With contracts let for the road westward, with a bridge to speed them eastward to Chicago, and with the princely grant of land in Nebraska, every obstacle seemed removed.

When the B&M construction train reached Albia in November, 1866, the editor of the *Albia Union* congratulated "the cities of Boston and New York, on their good fortune in having communication with the growing city of Albia." This "growing city" had not been reached without trouble. The Des Moines River had been bridged above Ottumwa in 1865; in January, 1866, part of the bridge was "carried away by the high water and floating ice," but by May repairs had been completed and only the iron for tracks was needed. In February the railroad hands at Ottumwa struck for higher wages — they demanded \$2.00 per day. The railroad answered this request by sending to Chicago for other workers; "work will



be suspended only a very short time," the newspaper commented.

From 1867 to 1869 the B&M moved steadily forward. On April 19, 1867, the road reached Russell, 23 miles west of Albia; by July 1, trains ran to Chariton; by December 23 to Woodburn, half-way across the state. Osceola was reached January 29, 1868; Afton on September 10; Cromwell on June 1, 1869; Corning on August 23; Villisca on September 28; and Red Oak on November 12, 1869.

Meanwhile, tracks were being laid from East Plattsmouth eastward, and on November 26, 1869, S. C. Carpenter reported laconically from Glenwood: "The last spike on the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad has been driven to-day at 12 o'clock, by J. S. Wolf and S. H. Mallory." The actual joining occurred at Hastings, nine miles west of Red Oak Junction.

Thus, after fifteen years of construction, preceded by two years of planning, the Burlington and Missouri River Rail Road Company had fulfilled its objective: "to construct and use a railroad extending from Burlington to the most eligible point on the Missouri River." The "construction" was now completed; on January 1, 1870, the "use" began, with the institution of regular through service. By using the tracks of the St. Joseph and Council Bluffs Railroad at Pacific Junction, the B&M could run its trains into Coun-



cil Bluffs, the focal point for Iowa's east-west lines. The B&M was the third road to reach Council Bluffs; the North Western and the Rock Island had reached that city in 1867 and 1869 respectively. Back on the Mississippi, the CB&Q bridge had been completed in 1868. On May 10, 1869, the driving of the Golden Spike at Promontory Point in Utah had joined the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific. Thus, when the B&M reached Council Bluffs on New Year's Day, it became another link in America's transcontinental system.